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ABSTRACT

Adult education in the year 2000 will be shaped by two kinds of trends: trends in the general development of North American society and trends in the evolution of formal education. Canada and the United States are undergoing a major transformation that affects their economies, political systems, cultures, and social structures. This transformation is the result of the following factors: (1) the changing role of knowledge in society; (2) an ongoing revolution in communication technology; (3) increasing global economic competition; (4) ecological limits to development; (5) growing cultural pluralism; and (6) greater difficulty in finding meaning in a changing world. The major goals of education are now priorities and performance. As advanced societies recognize their economic priorities as dependent on skilled resources, economic competition and restructuring set educational priorities. To reorient education toward these priorities and to improve performance, education systems rely largely on quantitative change within the framework of existing structures and assumptions. The concept of lifelong learning does not appear to have caught on. Society continues to believe in a series of assumptions about schooling and education that need to be questioned. The vision of learning and education systems needs to be enlarged to include integration of learning policy into broader social and economic policies and creation of a learning culture. The 1990s seem to be a strategic moment for fundamental rethinking of learning for the 21st century. (YLB)

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FOCUS AND ROLE OF ADULT EDUCATION IN THE YEAR 2000

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Summary of an address at the 40th Annual Adult Education Conference of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, Montreal, October 16, 1991

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MAJOR SOCIAL TRENDS

Adult education in the year 2000 will be shaped by two kinds of trends which we are already able to discern in the early 1990s: trends in the general development of North American society, and trends in the evolution of formal education.

Canada and the United States, like developed nations elsewhere, are undergoing a major transformation that is affecting our economies, our political systems, our cultures, and our social structures. This transformation is the result of a combination of forces.

1. Changing role of knowledge in our society

The distinguishing characteristic of all industrialized societies in the 1990s is the enormous importance of knowledge. Canada and the United States are knowledge societies, nations in which the generation, organization, management, verification, transformation, and dissemination of knowledge is the major social project and the major economic activity.

Information is increasing at a rapid rate; some estimate that it is doubling every five years. The organization of knowledge and knowledge systems through computers and conceptual frameworks is becoming more complex and the methods and techniques for acquiring and verifying knowledge are becoming ever more sophisticated.

Through modern media, knowledge is rapidly and pervasively disseminated throughout the world. Two-thirds of jobs are now in so-called "knowledge industries." Knowledge has replaced physical strength, land, and money as the basis of power.

The educational challenge of the "new" knowledge is twofold, curriculum and motivation:

(1) the problem of selecting what is relevant and reducing a flood of information into a channel of meaning (this is sometimes referred to as "learning how to learn");

(2) the problem of bridging the distance between complex and often abstract learning goals and immediate learning activities, the gap between the context of the real world and the text of curriculum and instruction.

2. Ongoing revolution in communication technology

If the challenge of knowledge is that we have so much to know, the challenge of communication technology is that we have so much power in our tools of communication.

Communication technology involves not only the obvious hardware of chips, satellites, laptops, fax machines, cellular phones, VCRs, robots and fiber optics. At a deeper level it involves inventing new processes, forming new networks and systems, changing our environment and the distinctions between the real and the artificial, altering our epistemology and forming our consciousness -- and our conscience.

This revolution is changing what we learn, how we learn, where we learn, when we learn and ultimately why we learn.

These are transforming technologies. We have tried to domesticate technology by corralling computers in computer labs, adapting the technology to the existing structure of education. Soon we will be forced to adapt education to the structure and the power of the new technology.

3. Increasing global economic competition

Since the early 1980s, we have all come to realize that, from the perspective of economics and education, we are all "nations at risk."

We can no longer rely on our traditional sources of wealth be they colonial empires, victory in war, natural resources or traditional manufacturing industries. The new power is brain-power, the new generator of wealth is education and training, and the new market place is the world.

The North American Free Trade Agreement, the emerging European Community, the Pacific Rim nations, the collapse of planned economies, the fragility of international trade agreements and monetary systems, the struggles of debtor nations, the single world stock market -- all these are reminders, first that invention, research and development are the necessary conditions of progress, and, second, that we are all competing with one another for intelligence.

It is not surprising, then, that in many countries business groups are urging educational reform, influencing the agenda of educational policy, and proposing various ways in which education and business can have a closer partnership. The social and humanistic agenda of education in the 1960s has become the economic and scientific agenda of education in the 1990s.

4. Pressing ecological limits to development

If the economic growth and development of advanced market economies has for many decades been in competition with the planned economies of the socialist nations, this contest has been won.

But before we celebrate this economic victory and announce the end of history, there is a new and more profound challenge facing industrialized nations: the ecological limits of human activity, especially the impact of acid rain, global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, destruction of rain forests, pollution of our air and water inheritance, and the squandering of non-renewable resources. In the realm of ecology, there may be national sovereignty in ability to destroy but there is no national sovereignty in the need to preserve.

If education is being pressed by economics to provide greater technical competence, it is coming under increasing pressure from ecology to provide ethical literacy -- an understanding of limits, the meaning of open and closed systems, the moral imperatives of interdependence and stewardship.

5. Growing cultural pluralism

We have always been aware of cultural pluralism, but differences in cultures have not been a problem so long as they were somewhere else. We prefer our anthropology at arm's length. We are comfortable in our own cultural distinctiveness -- dare we say smug in our superiority, in what sets us apart?

But when different cultures come into contact, our record of respect and exchange and insight is a bit spotty, and no part of the world -- Asia, Europe, Africa, the United States, Canada, Quebec -- provides us with very many illuminating models of intercultural human encounter, beyond the safe domains of music and cuisine.

Are we unable to educate a society to respect and value the cultural differences among its citizens -- differences that may challenge majority assumptions -- or only their capacity to "integrate" into a dominant social project? Are multicultural societies doomed to disintegration or is education capable of striking a balance between the common good of a society and the social ecology of distinct cultural groups?

6. Greater difficulty in finding meaning in a changing world

End-of-century and especially end-of-millennium periods have historically been fertile grounds for the rise of new religions, moral systems, and communities of belief.

The modern world is not easy to deal with: it is complicated, annoying, dangerous, frustrating, threatening and rapidly changing. As soon as we get it all together, someone moves the pieces. Our traditional systems of religion, philosophy, family, culture, community, and political continuity seem to be losing their hold over the imagination of the young, and even many of the old.

In many places we see the rise of fundamentalism in different forms -- in Christianity, in Islam, in the popularity of cults and New Age beliefs, in the durability of superstition and magic, in the retreat from the here and now into the past of nostalgia or the distance of the inner self or the outer cosmos.

In a period of complexity, diversity and change, it is difficult for educators to maintain a balance between knowledge and belief, between logic and intuitive knowledge. Those of us who are skeptical of belief need to look at it more seriously; those of us who are believers need to examine the rational underpinnings of what we believe. An education that touches the whole person has a responsibility to help us do both.

These six trends or forces are shaping our world of the year 2000. It looks like it is going to be a precarious world, one in which balance will not be easy to maintain -- between knowledge and our ability to communicate knowledge effectively, between economic and ecological imperatives, and between the diverging forces of pluralism and the converging need for coherence and meaning.

If we seriously claim that education should respond to the needs of our society, these, I suggest, are the needs of our society. How to extract understanding from knowledge? How to be literate in the new media? How to work smarter? How to respect the needs of our environment? How to cherish the cultural diversity of our neighbors? How to find stabilizing meaning in a complex and unstable era?

How can we educate the person, the citizen, and the worker to live a full and creative life in this environment? Is our present approach to education going to do this? Will our currently proposed reforms make it better?

EDUCATIONAL TRENDS

The formal education system is in the early stages of its third wave of change since the 1950s.

The dominant goals of education in the 1950s were the **socialization** of the young to live and work in industrial society and the **selection** of leaders. The hidden curriculum wasn't very hidden. We used square root to socialize and Latin to select.

In the 1960s, we shifted to two new goals: **expression** of ourselves through self-actualization and **expansion** of education to provide equality of opportunity to all for as long as their rising expectations sustained them. It was the era of the teacher-as-facilitator and of the school system as a growth industry.

During the 1970s and into the 1980s there was a second shift, this time from expression to **criticism** and from expansion to **contraction**. Schools were urged to go "back to the basics" of the 5 R's: reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic, and especially respect and responsibility. In many places, enrolments declined as the post-war baby boom moved through and out of the school system; everywhere resources became constrained because of economic instability and competition among different social priorities.

By the late 1980s we were moving into another phase of change and the major goals are now **priorities** and **performance**. As advanced societies recognize their economic priorities as dependent on skilled human resources, economic competition and restructuring are setting educational priorities:

literacy, numeracy, advanced skills in mathematics and science, ability to take initiative, entrepreneurship, sound academic foundation on which the necessary retraining through careers can be built.

The driving force for priorities is the establishment of national goals and standards for education in the United Kingdom, in the United States, and increasingly in Canada. This is complemented by a second driving force to stress performance and outcomes more than the input and processes of education systems. These trends stress assessment at the national and international level and the development of educational indicators.

To reorient education towards these priorities and to improve performance, education systems are relying largely on quantitative change within the framework of existing structures and assumptions: more days of schooling per year, year-round schools, more time-on-task, more required and substantial subject matter, more homework, more tests, higher standards and expectations, more teachers with more degrees and, above all, more schooling.

Drop-out rates must be reduced, more students must graduate from secondary school, more graduates must go on to post-secondary studies, school programs must begin earlier at the pre-school level, schools must offer extended childcare and supervision services, business and industry must do more training. Schools must compete for students and market their products.

If we persevere long enough and if our resources permit, schooling will begin with the first pre-pre-school encounter with the expecting mother and will go on through the last post-post-doctoral fellowship, into the first pre-pre-retirement seminar and end as the senior graduates from the last golden age macramé workshop ready for the Last Convocation. Continuing education as nightmare, a life-long alternative to working and living.

VISIONS OF LIFE-LONG LEARNING

The challenge facing adult educators thinking about the year 2000 is this: How can we bridge what is happening in the education system with what is happening in the society?

Despite over thirty years of rhetoric, I wonder if the concept of life-long learning has not really caught on. We

continue to believe in a series of assumptions about schooling and education that need to be questioned.

We tend to think of the education system as the structure of elementary and secondary schools and the teaching profession as the teachers who work in these schools.

Schools and other formal educational institutions are the natural places for learning; schools have a kind of monopoly on learning and alternative paths to learning and maturity are usually "discredited" symbolically and literally.

Attending school is so vital to learning that it should be compulsory for all during childhood and adolescence; dropping out is a failure of the school and/or of the individual; more schooling means more education.

Schools are largely modelled on the industrial structure of society out of which they have arisen: bureaucratic structure, specialization of function, standardization of procedure, break-up of content into subjects, periods, and units, group organization of learners into classes, and a consumer model of courses, credits, marking and qualifications ("taking" courses).

Schools are custodial institutions expected to "take care" of learners, keeping children off the streets, adolescents out of the shopping malls, and university students off the labour market.

Schools are residual institutions and should solve all of society's problems, taking up the slack left when other social institutions (such as church, family, community) falter or fail.

Adult education is essentially remedial, taking care of problems related to literacy, basic job training and cultural enrichment that the school system has been unsuccessful in solving.

Non-formal learning is a poor substitute for formal learning. Where possible, adults should be educated within the existing structure and prevailing assumptions of the education system.

And finally, we believe that we can substantially improve the quality of learning in our society and address pressing social needs without challenging these assumptions.

But as we move out of the industrial society and its assumptions, we are challenging existing structures in finance, economics, politics, health care, social service, transportation, entertainment and communication. We are now beginning to ask about learning.

- What are the limits of the education system in promoting learning? What are they not able to do?
- Should we reduce the amount of emphasis on initial learning (elementary and secondary) and seek to distribute learning more evenly through our career and life?
- Are there certain learners who do not learn effectively in the structure of our schools?
- Should we be encouraging more drop-outs and providing learning experiences for them to drop-into?
- Can we break the domination of attendance and duration as the measures of quality learning?
- Should we be reducing and pruning the curriculum rather than seeing curriculum development as eternal addition without subtraction?

I would suggest that we need to enlarge our vision of learning and education systems, beyond our present model of compulsory school systems. We need to shift our thinking from industrial-era education systems to knowledge-era learning environments.

A new vision would involve:

- An integration of education of the young into policies and structures of life-long learning;
- An integration of learning policy into broader social and economic policies, including not only the skills of international competitiveness but also the morality of a humane and compassionate society.
- A shift from the dichotomy between formal and non-formal structures to a wide array of learning options, including information networks, distance education, learning contracts, mentorships, work-study programs and cooperative learning;
- Careful identification of basic skills, core concepts and fundamental values that underlie a general education for

everyone at the beginning of the 21st Century;

- Creation of a "learning culture" that would embrace not only schools but also media, community centres, business, industry, voluntary organizations and cultural institutions;

- Realignment of key learning resources, especially teachers and schools, data bases and libraries, training programs in industry and community resources, to serve learners of all ages;

- Clear distinction between assessment of learning achievement and the means taken to attain this competence, encouraging the empowering of learners -- of all ages -- to attain their learning objectives and take more responsibility for their own learning.

STRATEGIES

The 1990s seem to be a strategic moment for fundamental rethinking of learning for the 21st Century.

Learning is becoming a political and an economic priority in our society, its contribution to our well-being and quality of life widely recognized. There is growing cooperation among various jurisdictions to set broad goals and agree on measures of quality. There is growing cooperation among many of the stakeholders of learning: teachers, administrators, policy makers, business leaders, governments. New research findings, new technologies, new forms of structures for learning are emerging. We now know more, we can do more, and we can create more than we could in the past.

The learning environments of the new century will be created to meet the new needs of a new kind of society. It would be too bad if they had to be created outside and around and in spite of the present education system. Including the "other" system of adult education.

The monastery was the central learning institution of the Middle Ages. The library was the central resource of the monastery. The scriptorium was the heart that kept the library alive. The monastery, library and scriptorium lost their central place in learning as the modern world evolved because a new kind of learning was needed, a new conceptual framework was needed, and a new medium was needed -- and found in the printing press. Few scribes became printers, few libraries introduced printing until too late. And more

cont-ed courses for scribes would not have made a difference.

At the close of Umberto Eco's novel The Name of the Rose, the library and the scriptorium and the monastery burn for weeks, charred fragments of parchment blowing in the wind over the frozen landscape.

Stat rosa pristina nomine; nomina nuda tenemus.

Once there was the rose together with its name, now only the name remains. If education systems are to be transformed into learning cultures, we need not just a new name -- such as life-long learning -- but a new rose. We should keep our ears tuned for the resonance of Umberto's echo.

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